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Exploring Teacher-Student Talk in Fostering Active Classroom Interaction: A Case Study of EFL Classrooms in Thailand School

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Abstract

This study investigates teacher–student talk patterns in fostering active classroom interaction in an EFL context at Islam Wittaya School, Thailand. Using a qualitative case study design, the research examined verbal interactions between one English teacher and 20 third-grade junior high school students through structured classroom observations over four weeks. Data were analyzed using classroom discourse analysis to identify characteristics of teacher talk, student talk, and interactional dynamics. The findings indicate that teacher talk serves as a strategic pedagogical tool through scaffolding, recasts, and adaptive questioning, gradually shifting classroom discourse from teacher-dominated exchanges toward more dialogic interaction. Student talk varies across proficiency levels and reflects different engagement patterns shaped by teacher communication strategies. Effective teacher–student interaction relies on the integration of pedagogical, affective, and socio-cultural factors including task-based activities, supportive feedback, and peer collaboration to foster active student participation and enhance communicative competence.

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1. Introduction

Learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in the era of globalization has become an urgent need for students across various countries, including Thailand. In the Thai educational context, English plays a strategic role as an international language, opening academic and professional opportunities for the younger generation. Despite its importance, challenges in EFL learning remain complex particularly the lack of active communication practice and the dominance of teacher-centered methods. The Education First English Proficiency Index (2023) reports that Thailand ranks relatively low in English proficiency within Asia, indicating a significant gap between curriculum policy and classroom practice.

Classroom interaction lies at the heart of effective language learning. According to Widin (2018), interaction in language learning is not merely an exchange of information but a primary medium for language acquisition. Jayanti et al. (2024) further emphasizes that the quality of classroom interactions is crucial for students' development of communicative competence. In EFL contexts, where exposure to English is limited outside the classroom, teacher-student interaction becomes the primary source of language input and output.

Research indicates that classroom interaction in EFL settings is often dominated by the IRF (Initiation–Response–Feedback) pattern, in which teachers maintain control through closed questions and minimal student responses (Afzali, 2020). This limits opportunities for authentic, reflective language production. Teacher talk, as argued by Han (2021), is not merely instructional it is a pedagogical instrument that can either facilitate or constrain student participation. Student talk, on the other hand, is a critical indicator of engagement; through language output, students test linguistic hypotheses and develop communicative competence (Winanta et al., 2020; Rahma & Irmayani, 2025).

Despite growing research on EFL classroom interaction, studies specifically focusing on Islamic schools in Thailand remain limited. Most prior research has centered on government or international schools, overlooking the unique sociocultural dynamics of Islamic educational settings including cultural values, teacher-student role expectations, and multilingual learner profiles. Islam Wittaya School, a private institution integrating Islamic values with the Thai national curriculum, represents this under-researched context.

There is therefore a clear research gap: limited studies have examined teacher–student talk patterns in Islamic EFL schools in Thailand, particularly in relation to how these interactions foster active learning among adolescent learners.

This study aims to: (1) analyze teacher talk patterns used to facilitate classroom interaction; (2) examine student talk characteristics and participation levels; and (3) explore how teacher–student talk interaction fosters active learning in an EFL classroom at Islam Wittaya School.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. Case study research aims to deeply understand a phenomenon within a real and specific context (Nursehag & Amalia, 2024). This approach was selected to explore teacher–student talk practices in fostering active classroom interaction in EFL learning.

The study was conducted at Islam Wittaya School, Thailand. Participants were selected purposively and consisted of 20 third-grade junior high school students and one experienced English teacher. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that the selected participants could provide rich and relevant data aligned with the research objectives.

Data were collected through structured classroom observations and documentation, including audio-video recordings and field notes. A total of 12 observation sessions were conducted over four weeks, with each session lasting 60 minutes. The observations focused on three key aspects: (1) the types and functions of teacher talk (e.g., questioning, scaffolding, and feedback); (2) students' verbal responses (e.g., choral answers, individual speech, and extended responses); and (3) overall interaction dynamics (e.g., turn-taking and discourse flow).

Data analysis followed three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The recorded interactions were transcribed and coded according to classroom discourse analysis categories, specifically by categorizing teacher talk (e.g., display questions, referential questions, recasts, and scaffolding) and student talk (e.g., minimal responses, extended responses, and student-initiated speech). Triangulation was applied by comparing data across three sources observation transcripts, video recordings, and field notes to ensure the consistency and depth of the findings.

Trustworthiness was established through credibility (prolonged engagement and triangulation), dependability (systematic documentation of data collection procedures), and confirmability (audit trail of coding and interpretation decisions).

3. Result

Data were collected through structured classroom observations over four weeks, comprising 12 sessions of 60 minutes each. Verbal interactions between the teacher and students were recorded and analyzed using a classroom discourse analysis framework. The findings are organized into three subsections: Teacher Talk Patterns, Student Talk Characteristics, and Interaction Dynamics.

Teacher Talk Patterns

Teacher talks in this study functioned as a strategic pedagogical tool that shaped opportunities for student participation. Within the Self-Evaluation of Teacher Talk (SETT) framework, teacher talk can either expand or restrict

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interactional space (Kurniawan, 2022). The findings show that the teacher employed questioning and scaffolding techniques adjusted to students' proficiency levels, consistent with Vygotsky's scaffolding concept of providing temporary support to extend learners' responses.

One representative excerpt illustrates the dominant pattern during the lesson opening phase:

Table 1. Example of Classroom Greeting Interaction

Turn	Speaker	Utterance	Function of Talk
1	Teacher	Good morning	Greeting / opening interaction
2	Students	Good morning	Reciprocal greeting
3	Teacher	How are you today?	Phatic question / rapport building
4	Student	I'm fine, and you?	Response + return question
5	Teacher	I'm fine too, thank you	Acknowledgement / closing exchange
6	Teacher	Nice to meet you	Politeness expression
7	Student	Nice to meet you too	Reciprocal politeness

Table 1 shows that teacher talk dominates in initiating and directing communication, while student talk functions primarily as a responsive follow up. This teacher-centered pattern is characteristic of early interaction stages in EFL classrooms. As noted by Kurnia et al. (2025), when interactions are predominantly teacher-controlled, student participation tends to be ritualistic and limited; however, once teachers begin integrating more communicative strategies, oral engagement increases significantly.

Student Talk Characteristics

The following interaction illustrates how student talk remained brief and formulaic within the IRF cycle during instructional activities:

Table 2. Student Talk Patterns in Teacher–Student Interaction

Turn	Speaker	Utterance	Interactional Characteristic
1	Teacher	Everyone, do you understand this lesson now?	Checking understanding (display question)
2	Students	Yes, we understand.	Choral response
3	Teacher	Do you understand?	Individual checking
4	Male Student	Yes, I understand.	Short response
5	Teacher	And do you understand this lesson now?	Repeated checking
6	Female Student	Yes, I understand.	Short response
7	Teacher	I will point to the numbers. Say the time together. Understand?	Instruction + checking understanding
8	Students	Yes, we understand.	Choral response
9	Teacher	What time is it?	Display question
10	Students	One o'clock. / Two o'clock. / ... / Ten o'clock.	Drill response (choral repetition)
11	Teacher	Okay, that's enough, students.	Closing / feedback

This interaction reflects teacher-dominated discourse with limited student output. The exchange follows a clear IRF pattern, characterized by strong teacher dominance and student responses that are brief, guided, and repetitive. Choral drilling, as seen in turns 8–10, reflects structured practice focused on repetition rather than spontaneous language production.

Interaction Dynamics

As the lessons progressed, teacher talk gradually shifted toward more dialogic forms. The following excerpt illustrates how scaffolding through questioning extended student talk:

Table 3. Example of Teacher Scaffolding Through Questioning

Turn	Speaker	Utterance	Function
1	Teacher	What did you do yesterday?	Open question
2	Student	I... play football	Partial response
3	Teacher	You played football. Say: *I played football yesterday.*	Recast + scaffolding
4	Student	I played football yesterday	Extended response

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This interaction shows that rather than using direct correction, the teacher modeled correct language and encouraged repetition a recast strategy that allowed students to refine their responses. Feedback strategies such as recasts, extended wait time, and follow-up questions helped promote more active student participation (Buchari, 2022). Overall, turn-taking became more balanced across sessions, and students were given greater opportunities to initiate speech.

4. Discussion

The findings confirm that teacher talk serves as the primary driver of classroom interaction dynamics at Islam Wittaya School. The predominance of the IRF pattern reflects a broader tendency in EFL contexts across Southeast Asia, where teacher-centered discourse is reinforced by sociocultural norms, including deep respect for authority and learners' fear of making public errors (Wang, 2021). In the Thai–Islamic educational context, these norms are particularly pronounced, as students are culturally conditioned to defer to the teacher rather than initiate communication.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings align with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): the teacher's scaffolding strategies recasts, structured questions, and wait time positioned students at the edge of their current ability, enabling gradual language development. However, the persistence of IRF dominance suggests that scaffolding alone is insufficient; teachers must also intentionally reduce discursive control to open space for student-initiated talk, consistent with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

The data in Table 4 further illustrate how pedagogical, affective, and socio-cultural dimensions interact to shape the quality of EFL classroom interaction:

Table 4. Factors Affecting the Quality of EFL Classroom Interactions (Mercer, 2019)

Domain	Factor	Main Benefit	Potential Risk	Sample Teacher Utterance
Pedagogical	Task-based activities	Promote authentic communication and learner autonomy	May create anxiety for low-proficiency learners	"Work in pairs and complete this task using English only."
	Scaffolding strategies	Support learner comprehension and task completion	Excessive support may reduce independence	"You may begin your sentence with I think that..."
	Wait time	Improves response quality and depth of thinking	Overextended wait time may reduce lesson momentum	"Please take a few seconds to think before answering."
Affective	Supportive	Builds confidence	Too much comfort	"It is okay to make

	classroom climate	and willingness to participate	without challenge may lower rigor	mistakes — this is part of learning."
	Positive teacher feedback	Increases motivation and engagement	Non-specific feedback has limited impact	"That is a clear and well-supported answer."
Socio-cultural	Peer collaboration	Encourages shared understanding and meaning negotiation	Errors may spread without teacher guidance	"Discuss your ideas with your group and agree on one response."
	Respect for authority	Maintains classroom order and mutual respect	May limit critical questioning if too rigid	"I appreciate your opinion — does anyone have a different perspective?"

As shown in Table 4, task-based activities and scaffolding strategies promote authentic communication and deeper cognitive engagement. Scaffolding within cooperative learning routines has been shown to sustain learner engagement and facilitate peer negotiation of meaning (Karim et al., 2025). Affective dimensions supportive classroom climate and positive, specific feedback are equally important: teacher verbal immediacy is strongly associated with students' willingness to communicate (Mardiah, 2020). Peer collaboration creates further opportunities for co-construction of knowledge, though without adequate teacher guidance, it risks reinforcing errors.

To move beyond IRF rigidity, teachers are recommended to: (1) use more open-ended, referential questions that invite genuine information exchange; (2) increase student initiation through structured discussion tasks; (3) reduce reliance on choral drilling in favor of individual, extended responses; and (4) promote dialogic teaching by explicitly inviting students to question, disagree, or elaborate. These strategies, supported by a culturally sensitive approach to authority and error correction, can progressively shift classroom discourse from teacher-dominated to genuinely interactive.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that teacher–student talk plays a vital role in fostering active classroom interaction in EFL learning at Islam Wittaya School, Thailand. Teacher talks functions as a strategic pedagogical tool through scaffolding, adaptive questioning, and constructive feedback that gradually shifts discourse from teacher dominance toward more dialogic interaction. Student participation varies across proficiency levels and is directly shaped by teacher communication strategies.

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Effective interaction requires the integration of pedagogical factors (scaffolding, wait time), affective dimensions (supportive climate, positive feedback), and socio-cultural elements (peer collaboration, awareness of authority norms). For third-grade students at a critical developmental stage, strategic teacher talk is essential in reducing speaking anxiety and creating psychological safety that encourages active participation.

The research underscores that teachers must develop critical awareness of how their language use can expand or restrict interactional space, viewing teacher talk not merely as a content delivery tool but as a dynamic instrument for building students' communicative competence. Future research should explore longitudinal interaction patterns and teacher training strategies for implementing more student-centered communication approaches across diverse EFL contexts.

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